

## SENATE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS: COVID-19: LESSONS LEARNED TO PREPARE FOR THE NEXT PANDEMIC

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) [convened a hearing to discuss the lessons learned from the current COVID-19 pandemic](#) response to begin preparing for the next pandemic. While Republicans were primarily interested in focusing attention on preparations for subsequent public health crises, Democrats were concerned that not enough attention was being placed on supporting the ongoing pandemic response.

At the end of the hearing, Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN) asked the witnesses to summarize the top actions they would recommend the federal government take in learning from the COVID-19 pandemic. The responses were as follows:

- **Dr. William Frist:** 1) invest and establish long-term partnerships with the private sector to develop supplies, vaccines, and treatments; 2) have budget mechanisms in place to ensure long-term funding for public health infrastructure; and 3) make the pandemic-driven telehealth flexibilities permanent.
- **Dr. Joneigh S. Khaldun:** 1) focus on health disparities; 2) invest in surveillance, testing, and tracing; and 3) increase funding for state and local health departments.
- **Dr. Julie L. Gerberding:** 1) develop a national vaccine plan that addresses development, distribution, and monitoring; 2) prepare for a potential health care surge when the flu season arrives; and 3) implement budgetary authority to allow for sustained investment in public health at the federal, state, and local level.
- **Michael O. Leavitt:** 1) advance clarity on the division of labor between state and federal governments during a pandemic; 2) rejuvenate the public health infrastructure; 3) modernize HHS/CDC data systems; 3) begin annual appropriations on emergency management.

### OPENING STATEMENTS

In his [opening statement](#), **Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN)** began the hearing under the sentiment that, because “memories fade,” Congress should begin work now to understand the failings of the federal government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic and develop legislation to be better prepared for the next one. He pointed to his recently released white paper containing five recommendations to prepare the U.S. for the next pandemic ([details](#)) as a starting point for the discussion. While congress has passed legislation to support future pandemics before, he noted, many challenges expressed over the last few

decades still remain today. He cited, in particular, a lack of clarity among states regarding their role in relation to the federal government on the pandemic response. He also highlighted the impact of the lack of testing supplies and necessary drugs and how that has contributed to unfortunate outcomes in the U.S.

**Ranking Member Patty Murray (D-WA)** agreed with the need to better prepare for subsequent pandemics, but urged that Congress should focus more of its attention on addressing the current response. “Reflecting on how we respond to the next crisis is no substitute for continuing to focus on our current response,” she said, adding that COVID-19 “continues to spread and has killed so many.” While “the White House is pretending this pandemic is over,” she stated, she added that she “want[s] to address the mistakes this administration is still making and are at risk of repeating as the pandemic continues.” One lesson she highlighted in particular was that the virus is “no great equalizer” and instead impacts persons of color at disproportionately higher rates. She urged for a national, universal paid sick leave policy to allow workers to stay home and “do what’s best for their health and the public health” without fear of losing their job. On the issue of vaccines, she claimed that the pandemic will not end until a vaccine is available and accessible to all, and stated that the U.S. needs a vaccine development and distribution process that is not politically driven. Last, she urged Congress to consider the lessons learned regarding the lack of testing in minority communities; the need to fight misinformation and vaccine hesitance; and, how to build global partnerships to ensure the pandemic subsides on a global scale.

#### **WITNESS TESTIMONY**

In his [testimony](#), **Dr. William Frist, Former Senate Majority Leader** remarked that what Congress has done in the past was not enough, and that most of what he recommended in 2005 has not been done. He emphasized the need for better communication to clarify who is in charge during a pandemic. He recommended this effort be led by National Security Council. In addition, he noted the need for better surveillance and that the U.S. must modernize its real-time domestic and international surveillance and threat detection system for diseases. On the research and development front, Dr. Frist called for a “biologically-based Manhattan project” to protect the U.S. against both unintentional and intentional biological threats. Of note, he also spoke to the importance of the current telehealth flexibilities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and urged they be made permanent. Last, he offered that any pandemic response must consider how to protect those who are most vulnerable, and that Congress must consider how to address the racial disparities experienced in the health care system.

**Dr. Joneigh S. Khaldun, MD, MPH, FACEP, Chief Medical Executive and Chief Deputy Direct for Health, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services** [spoke](#) to the fact that COVID-1i is still “very present” and that “we cannot let our guard down.” She stated the virus has “ravaged communities of color” and that these disparities exist “because of structural racism.” She urged for equitable access to testing, treatment, and vaccines, and added that “we need accurate and clear messaging from the White House on the disease.” Dr. Khaldun also spoke to the need for a national testing strategy and infrastructure, and called for increased investment in public health at the federal, state, and local levels.

**Dr. Julie L. Gerberding, MD, MPH, Executive Vice President and Chief Patient Officer, Merck & co., Inc., Co-Chair CSIS Commission on Strengthening America’s Health Security** [testified](#) on the importance of accelerating the U.S. preparedness efforts and cautioned that lawmakers should “take

seriously creating a health security agenda for America.” She stated there needs to be sustained national leadership at the level of the national security council, echoing Dr. Frist’s remarks. She also highlighted the importance of sustained, long-term budgetary investments in the U.S. public health infrastructure, stating the U.S. must end “the cycle of complacency in crisis.” In particular, she argued there should be specific emphasis on ensuring adequate, sustained funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Last, **Governor Michael O. Leavitt, Former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services** [stated](#) “any community that fails to plan and think that the federal government will ride to its rescue is mistaken.” He stated this is not because the federal government lacks the ability to do so, but is instead because the federal response plan is “based on focusing primarily on localized disasters.” He then offered four lessons for Members to consider. First, the federal government must clarify the roles between states and the federal government in advance of a disaster. Second, he noted that having an effective vaccine is critical, but only one component to solution. Third, he emphasized the importance of the federal government providing accurate situational awareness to U.S. residents, and that this responsibility primarily falls on the CDC. Last, he argued that pandemic preparedness requires investment every year.

## **MEMBER DISCUSSION**

### *Racial Disparities*

Ranking Member Murray asked what the U.S. could do to address the pandemic’s impact on communities of color. Dr. Khaldun replied that it is important to ensure there is adequate access to testing in minority communities, including eliminating the costs associated with receiving a test. She also said it is important to consider those workers who have been deemed essential during the pandemic – which include high rates of minorities – and to ensure they have supports at home to be as safe as possible.

In discussion with **Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr. (D-PA)**, Dr. Khaldun added that persons of color are more likely to live in poverty, more often deemed as essential workers, are more likely to rely on public transportation, and are more likely to live in unsafe or crowded living conditions. These conditions, she stated, all contribute to the higher rate of infection and mortality associated with COVID-19 in communities of color.

**Senator Susan Collins (R-ME)** asked what Congress could do to address the racial disparities among front line workers in nursing homes. Dr. Gerberding replied that it is important to test those who are working in known high-risk environments, calling nursing homes “intrinsic hotspots.” She added that testing should occur often and that everyone in those environments should be tested.

In discussion with **Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI)**, Dr. Khaldun agreed that giving employers clear and mandatory rules through an emergency temporary standard from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration would improve the public health response, including by better protecting persons of color.

### Vaccines

Ranking Member Murray asked how the administration could build the public confidence in a vaccine. Dr. Gerberding replied that transparency on the matter is important, and that federal entities such as the Food and Drug Administration and the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices should be involved in the formal safety assessments of the vaccines. She added that vaccine safety be monitored by the National Academy of Medicine, which Chairman Alexander strongly supported in subsequent remarks. She also agreed on the importance of having a comprehensive vaccine plan.

In discussion with **Senator Christopher S. Murphy (D-CT)**, Dr. Gerberding agreed that the U.S. should immediately join CEPI in its efforts to internationally develop a COVID-19 vaccine. She added that we must "solve this problem globally before we are all safe."

### Manufacturing Capacity

Chairman Alexander asked kind of manufacturing capacity the U.S. should have ready on hand to produce vaccines when they become available. Mr. Leavitt remarked that, while government manufacturing facilities exist, the funding to maintain them has decreased over time which prevents them from being stood up quickly. He added that partnering with the private sector would be helpful in this regard because the infrastructure already exists. To this, Dr. Gerberding noted that current vaccine manufacturing plants are already at capacity and that the U.S. should invest in build more.

**Senator Richard Burr (R-NC)** asked how to ensure upkeep of manufacturing facilities when there isn't a public health crisis. Mr. Leavitt replied that there needs to be annual appropriations to ensure manufacturing facilities are "kept warm so we can use them when there is a need."